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IDEALISM AND OPPORTUNISM IN JESUS' TEACHING.

A STUDY OF MATT. 5:17-20.

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LOOKING at certain passages in the gospels, men have said that Jesus was an unpractical enthusiast. To follow literally his teaching, "If any man would go to law with thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also," would be to put the honest and industrious at the mercy of blackmailers and thieves. Looking at other passages, men have said that Jesus was too effeminate to serve as the type of ideal manhood. The perfect man must have a proper sense of his own dignity and a reasonable degree of combativeness, enough at least for self-defense; but Jesus' teaching of non-resistance to evildoers is conducive to weakness of character, and the attempt to realize the teaching would again be to put the quiet and peaceable part of society at the mercy of the lawless element. A peace-at-any-price man commands little respect, and such maxims are acceptable only as a hyperbolic emphasis of ideals intended to be approached, but not to be actually realized.

Again, Jesus has been charged with inconsistency. In the Sermon on the Mount we find him declaring that whosoever shall break one of the least of the Mosaic commandments shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, and almost in the next sentence he is found abrogating important provisions of that code, the "eye for an eye" and the "tooth for a tooth" and the "hate your enemies." Now he is saying, "Resist not him that is evil, but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also," and now he declares that "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law [and that law included the *lex talionis*] till all things be accomplished."

In the one class of passages we have beautiful ethical ideals set for us to strive after; in the other we seem to be tied down to an ancient code, the rigid observance of whose often barbarous details would bind society to the past in a way prohibitive of all ethical progress. If Jesus was not a mere man subject to inconsistencies like ourselves, an insoluble mixture of idealism and opportunism, we must find somewhere the middle ground on which the two teachings can be harmonized to furnish for ordinary men a practical working rule of life; or, if we cannot find a reasonable synthesis of the two, we must suppose Jesus intended them to be consecutive, and must look for some point in time when the old law of retaliation is to be laid aside and the principle of non-resistance be put in practice.

Jesus apparently had seen in his disciples an inclination to think that this point had already been reached, and he cautioned them against it. "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." If the disciples hoped for a new order of things in which there should be no longer any restraints of law, they must look for it only when all the law has been fulfilled. It is to Jesus' idea of fulfilment, then, that we must look to know when the old system is to end and the new begin, or to find the desired synthesis of the two systems, the reconciliation of Jesus the idealist with Jesus the opportunist in the one character, at the same time ideal and practical, enthusiastic, yet thoroughly sane in his teachings and safe for us to follow.

What, then, did Jesus mean by the fulfilment of law? Evidently he did not mean that the old régime of law was to continue till the machinery of government had reached such perfection that every infringement of law would be met by its due and exact measure of retaliation, of eye for eye and tooth for tooth, till everybody should at length be perfectly satisfied. Such a condition is psychologically most improbable, for rarely is the victim of punishment satisfied that his punishment is just in kind and degree, and it is almost beyond hope that the science and art of penology will ever reach such a degree of nicety and skill as perfectly to satisfy the requirements of justice.

By fulfilment of the law Jesus must have meant the accomplishment of its purpose. Even primitive codes of law, crude and barbarous as they appear in the light of more civilized times, have for their motive, in common with more refined codes, the preservation of society. This was not the conscious motive of the avenger of blood, but it was the unconscious motive of society through which divine Providence worked out its plan in the evolution of the race. The immediate agent, the avenger of blood, is conscious only of a personal motive, revenge, or only dimly, if at all, of the social motive.

For every occupation or act there are two motives, the personal and the social or institutional. Both may be equally present to the consciousness of the individual, or one of them may predominate to the obscuring of the other. The minister's personal motive is to earn a living, his institutional motive is to build up the kingdom of God. Animated only by the personal motive, he becomes a mere place-hunter and time-server, but, moved supremely by the institutional motive, he, like Paul, counts all personal advantages but lost for the joy of the ministry. The sexton wants to earn a living, but under a strong institutional motive he would rather be a doorkeeper on a humble salary in the house of the Lord than to hold the most lucrative partnership in the tents of wickedness. The shoemaker's social motive is that men need shoes. The playwright and actor, and even the saloonkeeper, can plead that they are filling some want of society. The tramp alone makes no profession of service to the community.

In primitive society the personal motives, the passions, appetites, and instincts, must be relied on as in animals to preserve the race till its latent ethical forces grow strong enough to take their place, till the social motives come to consciousness in the individual. The order of evolution in the conscious motive of penology is first revenge, then self-preservation, then the preservation of society against the criminal classes, and finally the reformation of the criminal for his own sake and for society.

In Jesus' teachings on the perpetual validity of the law "till all be fulfilled" there is a clear recognition of these principles.

The primitive law, whether legislative or merely consuetudinal, had a purpose of supreme importance, the preservation of society, and never can the instrument of that purpose be laid aside till some new force is available to do its work. But when the new force is ready, the old may be laid aside; nay, *must* be laid aside, for its further use then becomes immoral. The law, "Whosoever sheddeth man's blood, by man's hand shall his blood be shed," holds good only until its purpose can be adequately accomplished by imprisonment. Thereafter capital punishment itself becomes murder.

But the force that Jesus counted on eventually to fulfil the purpose of law is the moral force of love in its various aspects of pity, compassion, condescension, and philanthropy. How love works its way into the office of law for the preservation of society is seen when the opening of a children's playground and the introduction of decent sanitary conditions in Five Points and Mulberry Bend make it possible for one policeman to keep better order than three could formerly do. More and more as love becomes effective may law be laid aside. But in the transition from one agency to the other no part of society can safely go far ahead of the rest in the practice of non-resistance. Society, like an army on the march in the presence of the enemy, must keep well together, and the new base of operations must be well secured before the old is abandoned. Law cannot be suspended till love is firmly in control.

The teaching has a wide range of practical applications. The conditions of life under which men find themselves constitute a law of their being. War is a survival of primitive conditions of fear and distrust and tribal narrowness of view. But can we abolish war today? Not one jot or tittle of it till we can effectually apply some other force to do war's necessary work. But whenever the same ends can be reached by diplomacy, courtesy, patience, fair play, and the application of the golden rule, war is criminal and its authors are to be condemned. Competition is the modern law of business, and the honest business-man finds himself under such pressure of competition as makes sharp practices, not to say dishonesty, seem essential

to success. Conscientious scruples are a handicap to him in the race. The few unscrupulous ones set the pace, and the many honest ones feel compelled against their will to meet sharp practices on their own ground. Young men beginning business see much to make them question whether honesty is still the best policy, as it used to be. The honest majority pass laws under cover of which to checkmate the more unscrupulous, but with only partial success. What shall the honest man do? For the man of mere average ability to try to stand alone in living up to his ideals would be to commit mercantile suicide. He might as well give up his business at once, but to do so is to fail to meet his obligations to those dependent on him.

To such a one coming to Jesus to learn what he ought to do Jesus would say, if he saw the man was lacking in ideals: "Go, sell out your business, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow me." But if he saw the man already given in heart to the ideal, he would probably give him this common-sense advice: "Competition as the present law of business has a purpose of great importance to fulfil in human society. Not one jot or tittle of this competition may you relax till that purpose is fulfilled. Should you in defiance of this law try to put in practice at once the extreme ideals of honesty, you will not merely be called least in the kingdom of business, you will actually find yourself to be out of it altogether. Yet you do well to lean hard toward your ideals. Is there not, then, a small margin of your present success, won by sharp practices, that you could safely sacrifice without losing your footing in business? By dealing a little more leniently with your competitors, when you have the advantage of them, you can help to create a condition in which the honest among them can more easily effect their ideals, you will relieve some of the pressure that the unscrupulous allege as their excuse, and by so much you will help to refute those who say that a man cannot succeed in business without cheating."

The hope of salvation from sin for the business world lies, not in the honest man's going out of business, but in his remaining in it and, while yet under the law of its conditions, devoting

to God, in the old Hebrew sense of *giving up to destruction* for God's sake, that margin of material success that comes by sharp practices over and above what is absolutely necessary for survival. In this margin, so consecrated to God, lies the possibility of the accumulation by small increments of the moral forces that shall in time fulfil the purpose of the present law of competition. In this margin lies the possibility of a visible difference, too seldom realized today, between the man of the world and the professed disciple of Christ.

It is not to be denied that Christ sometimes calls for sacrifice far beyond this margin, the sacrifice of a man's entire business, his health, even his life, and the welfare of wife and children. But such a call is as exceptional in the average Christian's duty as similar sacrifices for the nation's welfare are exceptional in the civic life. From the average man under average conditions Christ asks only a calm and conscientious following of a sane middle course, free from the fanaticism that would ignore the inherited conditions of life, yet ennobled by an enthusiasm for ideals and made effective by a firm and persistent leaning toward them that will in time accomplish the substitution of love for craft in fulfilling the purposes of law.